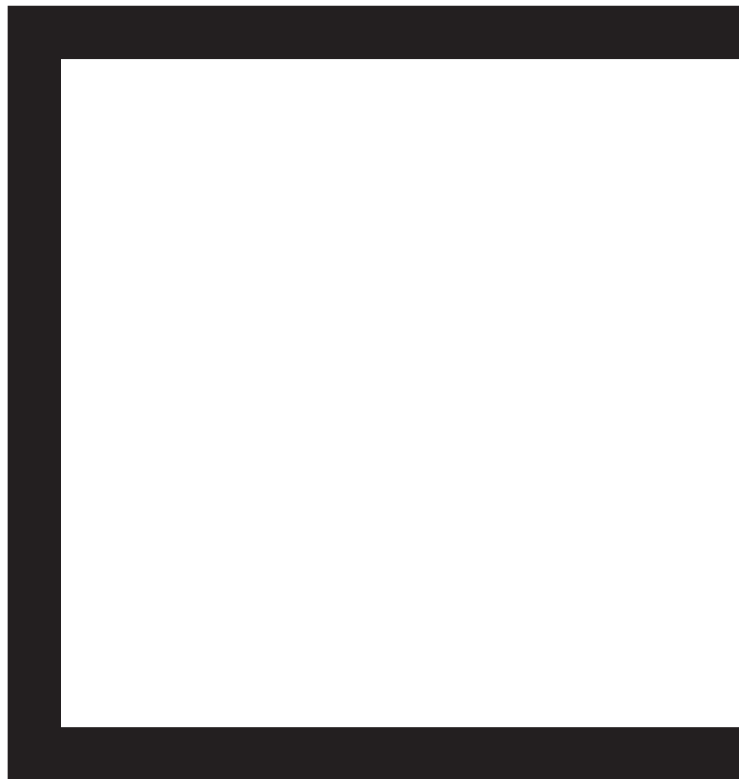


reviews



JOAN KIRKBY

## the far-away within us

philosophies of  
love and death

JACQUES DERRIDA

*Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview*  
An Interview with Jean Birnbaum,  
translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and  
Michael Naas

Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2007

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LINNELL SECOMB

*Philosophy and Love:  
From Plato to Popular Culture*

Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh,  
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In *Memoires for Paul de Man* and the eulogies collected in *The Work of Mourning*, Derrida has taught us how to deal with the loss of one we love through an ongoing conversation, a future-oriented engagement with their words and thought: 'Such a turn to the friend is all we have to give, and we turn not as already constituted beings ... but in an offer to remake ourselves'.<sup>1</sup> We are 'the heirs of questions', of reading and rereading, analysing and questioning.<sup>2</sup> In *The Last Interview* there is a brief reference to the occasion (the lastness) of the interview—'you can just say it', Derrida says, 'very seriously ill, and undergoing a very aggressive treatment'. (22) However, whenever the interviewer raises 'last things', Derrida talks about his ongoing engagement with a certain ethos of writing and his love of language as habitus, the necessity of saying what must be said no matter what, the importance of the university as a place that must organise its search for truth without any conditions attached, and the pressing need for an 'alter-globalist' world. It is as though he is setting us our homework for the years to come.

Referring back to the opening words of *Spectres of Marx*—'I would like to learn to live finally'—Birnbaum asks Derrida where he is today with regard to this desire 'to know how to live'. Derrida's response is to situate that desire in its context—his concern in 1993 with a 'new international': 'Beyond "cosmopolitanism", beyond the notion of a "world citizen", beyond a new world nation-state, even beyond the logic of ... political "parties"'. (22) These are the 'alter-globalist imperatives in which I

believe' which would require 'a large number of mutations in international law and in all the organizations that establish world order (IMF, WTO, the G8, and especially the United Nations and its Security Council', whose charter, forces of intervention, composition, and 'first of all its location—as far away as possible from New York City' would have to be changed'. (23) As for the intended question, his answer is 'no, I never *learned-to-live*' for that would mean learning to die and quite simply, 'I have never learned to accept it, to accept death, that is': 'I remain uneducable when it comes to any kind of wisdom about knowing-how-to-die or, if you prefer, knowing-how-to-live. I still have not learned or picked up anything on this subject.' (25) Rather like Nietzsche, who regarded death as irrelevant to one's life and work, Derrida skilfully steers the interview back to his ongoing engagement with the contemporary world which is 'more inequalitarian than ever, for millions and millions of living beings—human or not—who are denied their basic rights'.

Birnbaum inquires about the legacy of the generation of writers and thinkers of whom Derrida is virtually the last. Derrida's response is to foreground an '*ethos* of writing and of thinking, an intransigent or indeed incorruptible *ethos* (Hélène Cixous calls us the "incorruptibles"), without any concession even to philosophy, an *ethos* that does not let itself be scared off by what public opinion, the media, or the phantasm of an intimidating readership might pressure one to simplify or repress'. (27) This is an obligation which unites the members

of his generation and the entire milieu that supported them. He violently asserts the necessity of waging 'an unrelenting war against *doxa*, against those who are today called "media intellectuals", against a general discourse that has been preformatted by media powers that are themselves in the hands of certain politico-economic, editorial and academic lobbies'. (28) This is why, he attests, he continues to talk about Bourdieu, Lacan, Deleuze and Foucault. His dialogue with these thinkers is an effort to preserve and inject into the future their ideas and debates. All of these thinkers—as well as many others from the Bible to Plato, Kant, Marx, Freud, Heidegger, who 'form a part of this little "me" that they exceed on all sides' (30):

To ask me to renounce what formed me, what I've loved so much, what has been my law, is to ask me to die. In this fidelity there is a sort of instinct for self-preservation. To renounce ... some difficult formulation, some complication, paradox, or supplementary contradiction, because it is not going to be understood ... is for me an unacceptable obscenity. (30)

Derrida's idea of mourning as a future-oriented devotion to the infinite alterity of the other and to the far away within us strongly resembles the predominant idea of love discussed in Linnell Secomb's book, whether it is Nietzsche's 'joint longing for the unknown, the undiscovered' (30) or Irigaray's 'mediation which never reaches a static conclusion and is always in the process of becoming'. (14) *Philosophy and Love*:

*From Plato to Popular Culture* is an appealing, immensely readable book that examines concepts of love in Plato, Nietzsche, de Beauvoir, Levinas, Fanon, Irigaray, Barthes, Butler, Foucault, Derrida and Nancy, along with sometimes unlikely bedfellows: Sappho, *Frankenstein*, *Desperate Housewives*, *She Came to Stay*, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, *Night Cries*, *Jedda*, *Orlando*, *You've Got Mail*, weddings by Fluxus Art and [www.loveartlab.org](http://www.loveartlab.org), and *Dogville* respectively. Drawing on Derrida's idea of 'an attempt to blur the borders between literature and philosophy ... in the name of hospitality', Secomb succeeds in creating congeniality between these disparate discourses. (5) Each chapter interleaves an account of the philosophical text with that of the cultural text, moving backwards and forwards between the two, simultaneously introjecting the voices of other critics and philosophers into the mix, making for a richly textured experience.

The concepts of love range from Plato's view of love as a seeking of wisdom to Nietzsche's 'star friendship' in which two separate beings share a joint longing for the distant unknown, to Levinas' placing the love relation (the face-to-face encounter) at the centre of ethics and sociality, to Barthes's idea of love as 'retrospective fabulation'. (2) The chapters on de Beauvoir and Fanon ground us in the material conditions of our loving. Beauvoir discusses woman's way of being in the world with an emphasis on the importance of freedom, equality and mutual recognition, arguing that sexual inequality arises from repeated, larger and smaller acts of aggression and oppression

which have become habitualised and normalised through endless reiteration. Fanon problematises the issues of transcendence, equality and freedom in a postcolonial context. Nancy recommends our shattering and opening to the other as an integral part of community while Derrida argues for friendship with the stranger as central to the health of the democracy to come.

Secomb points out that *The Symposium*, 'perhaps the most enduring and influential philosophical reflection on love', describes not only the experience of love but also the passions of the mind, revealing a link between the erotics of sexuality and philosophical inquiry. (10) Love is also related to creativity; finding a compatible other may lead to a child or to 'the fame associated with creative productions' though in Plato 'creative production results from intimate relations between men'. (13) Though the Platonic idea of love with its ladder leading from the lower form of individual love of a particular beloved to a higher form of love of the good and the beautiful in general has dominated Western philosophy, Secomb argues that Platonic love has always suggested 'a more complex entwining in which philosophic and erotic seduction are thoroughly enmeshed'. (23) 'Love is the movement toward, rather than the final attainment of abstract and particular beauty.' Secomb also discusses Irigaray's emphasis on 'the intermediary role of love', 'a mediation never reaching a static conclusion and always in the process of becoming'. (14) Irigaray argues that in Plato's tying love to procreation and immortality 'love loses its daimonic

character’—‘its divinity, its mediastic, alchemical qualities’: ‘A sort of teleological triangle is put in place instead of a perpetual journey ... a permanent becoming’. (15)

In the chapter on Nietzsche and *Frankenstein*, Secomb cites Nietzsche’s denigration of love as ‘avarice’, ‘a lust for possession’, and ‘the most ingenious expression of egotism’ (29) as well as his privileging of a concept of love as a longing for the distant and the unknown. Nietzsche also suggests that ‘through egoism love has the potential to create a bond based on a shared desire for the new’, ‘a joint longing for the unknown, the undiscovered, the new and different’. (30) This friendship founded on a mutual desire for a passionate life ‘beyond the mundane ordinary life of the masses’ Nietzsche calls star friendship. (31)

In ‘Simone de Beauvoir’s *Desperate Housewives*’ Secomb argues that de Beauvoir’s insistence on the significance of freedom, equality and mutual recognition in the love relationship challenges theories of love founded on self-sacrifice, boundless generosity, and the unconditional bestowal of love. In *The Second Sex* de Beauvoir explains how historically women have been confined to a life of immanence: ‘Her body is not perceived as the radiation of a subjective personality, but as a thing sunk deeply in its own immanence; it is not for such a body to have reference to the rest of the world, it must not be the promise of things other than itself; it must end the desire it arouses’. (46) However, women’s reproductive role is ‘not the origin or cause but rather a justification for the exclusion of women’. (45) De Beauvoir also argues, in terms that Secomb makes brilliantly relevant to

*Desperate Housewives*, that ‘having turned to man, as the means to attain *ersatz* transcendence, woman then becomes both a slave and a tyrant in the sexual relation’. (49) Moreover, if the man to whose transcendence she has allied herself does not live up to her unrealistic idealisation, ‘he must be trampled on’. (50) However, de Beauvoir’s account does allow for ‘a genuine experience of love in which each lover would approach the other from a position of equal freedom—and each would recognise the freedom of the other’ and each ‘could move towards transcendence, could engage with and transform the world and remain open to new, different and transforming futures’. (51)

Chapter 4 on Levinas discusses both the love relation of the face-to-face encounter and erotic love which intertwines carnality with responsibility thereby going beyond both self and other toward a future, which may be a child or a movement toward future transcendence. For Levinas, ‘human sociality rests on recognizing the demand for care, generosity and selfless love, conveyed in the face-to-face encounter’. (59) In his conceptualisation, we offer to the other our plenitude: ‘We are nourished by our encounter with the world’, we experience enjoyment and love of life; there is ‘a love of the world that forms the basis for love of, or responsibility, for others’. (60) Secomb also discusses Levinas’s concept of home or dwelling place which facilitates our ability to act on and transform the world (60) as well as de Beauvoir’s and Irigaray’s critiques of Levinas’s representation of the feminine.

In chapter 5, ‘Colonial Love in Fanon and Moffatt’, Secomb explores Fanon’s and Moffatt’s

problematising of 'our romancing of individual inter-racial love stories' and the 'humanist, benevolent love, used in the service of colonial conquest'. (77) For Fanon, transcendence is central to human subjectivity, but transcendence cannot be given. Self-consciousness is attained not through recognition by others but through self creation, asserting the value of one's identity and culture. In his chapters on inter-racial love Fanon problematises the politics of recognition. Secomb discusses critiques of Fanon by Homi Bhabha (Fanon obscures the importance of the other in the construction of both individual subjectivity and cultural identity) and Rey Chow, who interrogates the positioning of woman in the postcolonial community that Fanon envisages, arguing that 'he is threatened by the future transgressive crossing of boundaries implied by women becoming active agents in this postcolonial community formation'. (87) Secomb also discusses the importance of the depiction of singer Jimmy Little in *Night Cries*, a film which gestures toward a more complex account of culture in which the colonised are not simply assimilated but are rather active agents in the creation of a hybrid community. (92)

In chapter 6 Secomb argues that Irigaray redirects the gift of love by inventing the phrase 'I love to you' which creates space and air, and preserves distance and difference—in contrast to 'I love you' which implies ownership or control and risks turning the beloved into the object of my affection. (99) In conclusion, Secomb writes: 'Irigaray's *I Love To You* facilitates an indirection that thwarts possession and closure and enables an openness to the other-

ness of the other for "it is the surprise, the unknowability, the otherness of the other that open and maintain the transformative and futural vector of relationality"'. (109)

In chapter 7, Barthes's *A Lovers Discourse* is examined alongside the Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan film *You've Got Mail*. For Barthes, love is a kind of script; a lover's discourse arises from the 'memory of the sites, books, encounters, where such and such a thing had been read, spoken, heard' suggesting that love is but the performative re-enactment of lover's discourses. (122)

The chapter on Butler and Foucault 'Que(e)rying Marriage' examines Butler's re-definition of kinship as 'an "enacted practice" through which dependents are nurtured and cared for' (130), thus challenging the idea that children can only be nurtured in normative heterosexual or same sex marriage. Secomb points out that 'while Foucault rejects conventional family institutions he nevertheless acknowledges the importance of loving relations' and suggests that 'same-sex marriage has not only the potential to acknowledge the love between men ... but also in the process to reinvent the meanings, and significance and practice of marriage'. (137) Secomb concludes that if Foucault is right that 'it is love, not sex, between men, that is disturbing, then marriage as a symbol of love may disrupt dominant discourses about male homosexuality'. (137) The chapter ends with an account of marriages performed by the Fluxus Art Performance Group and love.art.lab.

The chapter on Derrida and Nancy brings out the significance of love in the formation of subjectivity, community and culture. For

Nancy, thinking itself is love and 'It is love that inaugurates the becoming of the singular being'. (143)

Love is an opening of the subject to the other so that the subject is from that moment, that is to say from the outset, shattered ... From then on, I is *constituted broken* ... As soon as there is love, the slightest act of love, the slightest spark, there is this ontological fissure that cuts across and that disconnects the elements of the subject-proper—the fibres of its heart. One hour of love is enough, one kiss alone, provided it is out of love and can there in truth be any other kind? (145)

In Secomb's words: 'Love shatters the atomistic being introducing alterity into the heart of being.' (146) Nancy distinguishes himself from Levinas, arguing that 'all forms of love facilitate the ethical relation of responsibility as all expose us to the sociality of existence'. (147) The discussion of Derrida focuses on *The Politics of Friendship* which proposes 'that it is friendship with the stranger that is the "star friendship"' and calls for an "indefinitely perfectible" democracy "to come" that exceeds fraternal exclusions of the sister and cousin, the feminine and racial/cultural other'. (151)

In the conclusion, Secomb suggests that perhaps the subtext of the book has been 'that philosophy is love of thinking, but that thinking itself is love'. Philosophy is 'a fascination, an infatuation, with thinking': 'Philosophy plays with thought, invents concepts, speculates,

reflects and investigates. It is not closure or completion but unending intrigue.' Similarly love is 'an incompleteness, mediation', a 'movement between lack and completion'. (157) Moreover, Secomb writes: 'stories and literature participate in and share with love and philosophy the structure of mediation, deferral, unendingness and even of unworking'. (158) 'All three unravel finality, stasis, closure and totality.' (162) The only thing I missed in this thoroughly engaging book was Kristeva's *Tales of Love* with its baroque psycho-philosophical account of the exhilaration of the 'I' in love, poised at the borders of narcissism and idealisation:

Love is the time and space in which 'I' assumes the right to be extraordinary. Sovereign yet not individual. Divisible, lost, annihilated; but also through imaginary fusion with the loved one, equal to the infinite space of superhuman psychism. Paranoid? I am, in love, at the zenith of subjectivity.<sup>3</sup>

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JOAN KIRKBY is a senior research fellow in the interdisciplinary gender studies program in Sociology at Macquarie University. Recent publications include "'Remembrance of the Future": Derrida on Mourning', *Social Semiotics*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2006, 'Reading Neocon Rhetoric: Walt Whitman and the War on Terror' in Deborah Staines (ed.), *Interrogating the War on Terror* (2007), and 'Mesmer, Swedenborg and the Spiritualist Sciences' in Jane Goodall and Christa

Knellwolf (eds), *Frankenstein's Science* (2008).  
She is currently completing a book on Emily  
Dickinson and the Nineteenth-Century Darwin  
Wars.

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  2. Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p. 29.
  3. Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985, p. 5.